

03/05/21 Friday

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US Senate Debates COVID-19 Relief Bill Amid Republican Efforts to Halt Its Passage
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

With US Vice President Kamala Harris' tie-breaking vote advancing the COVID-19 relief package to the Senate on Thursday, the aid measure is now expected to endure a series of roadblocks amid Republican efforts to delay its passage. Democrats intend to clear the relief aid before March 14, when some emergency benefits are due to expire.

Lawmakers began debating the contents of the highly-anticipated COVID-19 relief package on Friday, kicking off its proceedings by opting to reject a measure to hike up the federal minimum wage over the next five years.

The measure, which was sponsored by Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-VT), was rejected with a vote of 58 to 42, as seven Democrats and one Independent voted against the proposal. The vote, however, appeared to be largely symbolic since the Senate parliamentarian ruled [last week](#) that the provision violated the Byrd Rule, and could not be included in light of the special budget rules.

Following the vote, Sanders [told reporters](#) that he was not surprised by the development because "we knew exactly what was happening," adding that he has no intention to give up on the effort.

"If we have to vote on it time and time again, we will and we're going to succeed," he said. "The American people understand that we cannot continue to have millions of people working for starvation wages."

Although US President Joe Biden promised early on in his presidential campaign that he would fight to raise the minimum wage to \$15 an hour, the recent Senate vote once again brings into question whether he will be able to deliver on that pledge.

Earlier during the day's proceedings, Senate Democrats agreed to pull back on emergency jobless benefits in a bid to appease moderates and, ultimately, solidify support among party members in order to prevent Republicans from blocking the bill's passage.

Though the House of Representatives originally passed the aid package with a \$400 boost for unemployment benefits through August, the new agreement saw the figure reduced to \$300, with benefits being extended for an extra month.

The agreement will also provide tax relief to Americans and exempt up to \$10,200 in benefits received in 2020, with the officials also allowing for the opportunity to be extended through October 4. The initial end date that was set by the US House ran until August 29.

Additionally, the deal between Democrats extends tax rules on excess business loss limitations through 2026, offering one extra year.

Democrats anticipate they will be able to pass the package before some emergency COVID-19 benefits expire on March 14; however, their efforts are more than likely to encounter several

roadblocks, as Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY) previously indicated the GOP would be “fighting in every way we can” to hold the bill up.

"There's going to be a lot of amendments," Sen. Mike Braun (R-IN) said of Republican plans.

"You're going to have a lot of amendments, you're going to have a lot of stuff that's going to be struck through an amendment, but whether we get anywhere on that I'm not sure."

Earlier, after Harris' tie-breaking vote allowed the package to be introduced to the congressional chamber, the bill was immediately put on a pause on Thursday after Sen. Ron Johnson (R-WI) initiated an 11-hour delay by requiring Senate clerks to read the 628-page measure aloud.

Johnson [later remarked](#) that he felt “bad for the clerks that are going to have to read it, but it's just important.”

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-NY) has vowed that the bill will pass, [stating](#) in the chamber on Friday that “we’re not going to make the same mistake we made after the last economic downturn when Congress did too little to help the nation rebound, locking us into a long, slow, painful recovery.”

“We are not going to be timid in the face of big challenges,” he underscored.

The relief bill currently provides funds for COVID-19 vaccines, testing and aid to state and local governments, as well as assistance for schools and subsidies for health insurance, among other benefits. It also includes direct payments of up to \$1,400 to most Americans, with restrictions in place for individuals who make more than \$80,000 and couples whose earnings exceed \$160,000.

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US Barred Myanmar From Removing \$1 Billion Out of New York Account After Military Takeover - Report

by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Earlier this month, US President Joe Biden issued an executive order that prevented Myanmar from accessing funds currently being held by US banks. The move came after the Southeast Asian country's military carried out a coup d'état and deposed democratically-elected government officials.

US government officials prevented Myanmar's military leadership from moving \$1 billion held at the Federal Reserve Bank of New York in early February, just days after the nation's military seized power.

Citing three officials, Reuters [reported](#) that the transaction was attempted by the Central Bank of Myanmar on February 4, three days after the military coup unfolded and caught the attention of world leaders.

One of the sources informed the outlet that the financial request was blocked automatically because Myanmar was previously placed on the international Financial Action Task Force's so-called “gray list” over money-laundering concerns. Myanmar reportedly ended up on the list over concerns that drug-trafficking funds were being cleared through the country's bank system.

After the initial safeguard was triggered, US officials reportedly then held off on processing the transaction, eventually indefinitely blocking Myanmar from accessing the funds after Biden's February 10 [executive order](#) froze the nation's bank accounts in the US.

At the time, Biden did not indicate during his declaration that Myanmar's military officials had attempted to access the funds. It's also worth noting that the Central Bank of Myanmar was specifically named as part of Myanmar's post-coup government.

Two of the sources Reuters spoke to on the condition of anonymity revealed that the executive order was intentionally meant to give the Federal Reserve legal authority to freeze the funds, which are managed by the Central Bank and International Account Services, an arm of the Federal Reserve.

Neither the Federal Reserve nor the US State Department have commented on the report. Findings by Reuters came on the [same day](#) that the US Department of Commerce added the country's Defense Ministry, Home Affairs Ministry, the Myanmar Economic Corporation and the Myanmar Economic Holding Limited to a trading blacklist.

Aside from the US, multiple countries, including Canada, the UK and the European Union, have issued sanctions against Myanmar after the February 1 coup unfolded and was followed by a deadly crackdown against residents opposing the military takeover.

The United Nations stated that Thursday proved to be the [deadliest day](#) since the coup began after some 38 people were killed. To date, upwards of 50 individuals have died amid the violent unrest.

Myanmar came under military control once its leadership declared the November 2020 elections were fraudulent, since the National League for Democracy party overwhelmingly beat out individuals from the military-backed political party.

Claiming that the previous government failed to thoroughly examine the allegations, the military has since imposed a one-year state of emergency, with new elections expected to be held in the near future. The country's election commission previously indicated that there was no evidence to support fraud claims.

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Top Iranian Official: Soleimani's Anti-Terror Efforts Allowed Pope Francis to Safely Visit Iraq by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Iranian Gen. Qassem Soleimani, who served as the commander of Iran's elite Quds Force, was assassinated in an early January drone strike ordered by former US President Donald Trump. The one-time commander-in-chief claimed the "defensive" strike was conducted in part because the Iranian official was plotting "imminent" attacks against US forces.

A senior Iranian official remarked on Friday that Pope Francis' trip to Iraq would not have been adequately safe had it not been for the anti-terror operations previously ordered by Soleimani and Iraqi commander Abu Mahdi Muhandis.

Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, who acts as the special adviser to the speaker of the Iranian Parliament, stated in a [tweet](#) that if it wasn't for Soleimani, Muhandis and "the martyrs of the

fight against terrorism and Daesh in Iraq and the region, the Pope would not have been able to enter Iraq today in safety and peace.”

Soleimani and Muhandis, who was previously the deputy head of Iraq’s Popular Mobilization Units, were both killed in the January drone strikes that were carried out near Iraq’s Baghdad International Airport. A few days later, retaliatory strikes were conducted against the Ain al-Asad air base in western Iraq, which left dozens of US service members suffering from traumatic brain injuries, though none died from the injuries.

The January strikes were largely seen as a boiling point between Iran and the US amid Washington’s so-called “maximum pressure” campaign against the Middle Eastern country. The campaign came about after Trump decided to withdraw the US from the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, a move that effectively reimposed a series of harsh sanctions on Iran, on top of a slew of designations and additional sanctions that followed.

Amir-Abdollahian’s single Friday tweet also saw the adviser blast Washington’s Middle East policies, saying that the US’ meddling practices have only continued to serve as “source of instability” in the region.

Pope Francis’ trip proved to be the first time that the head of the Roman Catholic Church has ever visited Iraq, as well as being the first trip the pontiff has made since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Shortly after arriving in Baghdad, Francis told Iraqi authorities in an [address](#) that in order to provide a “better, more just and more humane world” for future generations, individuals need to “learn to look beyond our differences and see each other as members of the same human family.”

Pope Francis also took the opportunity to talk on terrorism and fundamentalism, saying that both have “brought in its wake death, destruction and ruin.” Touching on the brutal targeting of the Yazidi ethnic minority by Daesh militants, he added that “the damage is so much deeper if we think of the heartbreak endured by so many individuals and communities.”

The four-day trip will see the pope visit with the Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the leader of Iraq’s Shiite Muslims, and travel to the north of the country to lead prayers in areas that were retaken from Daesh militants.

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Psaki Defends Biden’s Immigration Agenda After Trump Slams Administration for Migrant ‘Tsunami’
by [Mary F.](#)

Former US president Donald Trump on Friday slammed President Biden for what he called a “spiraling” tsunami at the US-Mexico border, claiming that the “disastrous leadership” of Biden has led to a “mass incursion into the country by people who should not be here.”

On Friday, White House press secretary Jen Psaki defended the Biden’s administration immigration policies as Republicans, including Trump, accused the president of prompting a migration surge at the southern border.

During a press briefing Friday, Psaki responded directly to Trump's lengthy statement released earlier Friday censuring Biden's immigration agenda. In his statement, the former president argued that the reversal of several Trump-era policies has led to an immigration crisis.

"We don't take our advice or counsel from former President Trump on immigration policy, which was not only inhumane but ineffective over the last four years," Psaki said, [The Hill reported](#). "We're going to chart our own path forward, and that includes treating children with humanity and respect."

In his statement, Trump called immigration as the southern border a "spiraling tsunami."

"The spiraling tsunami at the border is overwhelming local communities, depleting budgets, crowding hospitals, and taking jobs from legal American workers," Trump [wrote](#) in a written statement.

"When I left office, we had achieved the most secure border in our country's history. Under Biden, it will soon be worse, more dangerous, and more out of control than ever before. He has violated his oath of office to uphold our Constitution and enforce our laws," Trump added.

Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas has refuted claims that the influx of migrants, many of whom are unaccompanied minors, is contributing to an immigration crisis.

However, in a statement on Thursday, White House assistant press secretary Vedant Patel revealed that Biden has requested that senior members of his team travel to the border to provide the president with a briefing on the situation.

"President Biden has asked senior members of his team to travel to the border region in order to provide a full briefing to him on the government response to the influx of unaccompanied minors and an assessment of additional steps that can be taken to ensure the safety and care of these children," Patel said, [The Hill reported](#).

Since Biden took office, he has removed some Trump-era immigration policies. In addition to halting the construction of the Mexico border wall, Biden has also stopped the "Remain in Mexico" policy, which requires that migrants from Central American countries wait for asylum hearings outside the US.

In addition, Biden has also issued an order affirming the 2012 Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program.

DACA is an Obama-era immigration policy that allowed young undocumented individuals who had arrived in the US as children to be given work permits, as well as a renewable two-year period of deferred action on deportation.

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Pentagon Assessing Its Networks for Possible Damage After Microsoft Breach, Spokesman Says

by [Mary F.](#)

Earlier this week, Microsoft accused a Chinese hacking group known as "Hafnium" of breaching its Exchange Server email application. Microsoft had previously accused the company of attempting to steal information from infectious disease researchers, defense contractors, policy think tanks and non-governmental organizations.

Pentagon spokesperson John Kirby on Friday revealed the US Department of Defense was assessing its networks for possible damage after the Microsoft breach.

"We are aware of the Microsoft threat intelligence center's report. We are currently assessing our networks right now for any evidence of impact," Kirby said.

"We are also ... taking all necessary steps to identify and remedy any possible issues related to the situation," he added.

The latest statement by the Pentagon comes after White House press secretary Jen Psaki said that the Biden administration is monitoring the [Microsoft breach](#), which had a "large number of victims," [the Hill reported](#).

"This is a significant vulnerability that could have far-reaching impacts. First and foremost, this is an active threat," Psaki told reporters during the press briefing. However, she did not provide any information on whether any federal agencies were compromised by the hack. She did urge network operators who had been comprised to swiftly "take appropriate steps."

"Everyone running these servers — government, private sector, academia — needs to act now to patch them. We are concerned there are a large number of victims and we are working with our partners to understand the scope of this. So it's an ongoing process," Psaki said, [the Hill reported](#).

In a [Thursday blog post](#), cybersecurity group FireEye said that the hackers had targeted "US-based retailers, local governments, a university, and an engineering firm" as well as a Southeast Asian government and a Central Asian telecom group.

The Czech Republic's National Office for Cyber and Information Security also [released a statement Friday](#) stating it would assisting organizations impacted by the hack, suggesting that the hack has had international ramifications.

This week, the Department of Homeland Security also [issued an emergency warning](#) to any government agencies using the Exchange email software.

Since the breach, Microsoft has updated its software.

"Even though we've worked quickly to deploy an update for the Hafnium exploits, we know that many nation-state actors and criminal groups will move quickly to take advantage of any unpatched systems," Tom Burt, Microsoft's corporate vice president of customer trust and security, wrote in a [blog post](#).

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Two Top Female Aids Leave Andrew Cuomo Administration Amid Sexual Harassment Scandal by [Mary F.](#)

New York Governor Andrew Cuomo in recent weeks has been accused of sexual harassment by two former aides, soon after being accused of deliberately concealing the real number of COVID-19 deaths in nursing homes from the federal government.

Two more aides to Andrew Cuomo have left their jobs, as the New York governor faces sexual harassment allegations from two former aides, Lindsey Boyland and Charlotte Bennett, and a third woman, Anna Ruch.

According to Bloomberg, both press secretary Caitlin Girouard and interim policy adviser Erin Hammond have left the governor's office following the sexual harassment and nursing home scandals.

However, it is unclear if the two aides' departures are related to the allegations surrounding Cuomo. In a previous statement to [The New York Times](#), Girouard denied the sexual assault allegations made by Boylan.

"Ms. Boylan's claims of inappropriate behavior are quite simply false," Girouard said at the time. Cuomo spokesperson Rich Azzopardi told Bloomberg on Friday that Hammond's departure had been planned for several months.

"Her departure allows her to focus on her family," he noted.

Gareth Rhodes, a senior adviser to Cuomo who helped lead the state's vaccination plans, also revealed this week that he was leaving Cuomo's administration to return to his role at the Department of Financial Services. First deputy press secretary Will Burns also announced that he would leave the administration this week.

In a Wednesday statement, Cuomo revealed that he was "embarrassed" by the allegations but he has no intentions of stepping down. Cuomo's latest comments come after he released a separate statement Sunday noting that while his actions in the workplace "may have been insensitive or too personal," he "never inappropriately touched anybody."

The allegations against Cuomo have been met with widespread criticism and demands the governor to resign.

One former aide, [Lindsey Boyland](#), accused Cuomo of kissing her without consent, and also revealed that the New York governor allegedly suggested that they play strip poker. Another former aide, Charlotte Bennett, [accused](#) the governor of making unwanted advances toward her last spring. On Monday, Anna Ruch, a third woman, accused the governor of sexual misconduct toward her during a friend's wedding, [The New York Times reported](#).

On Friday, New York lawmakers also passed a bill to revoke temporary powers given to Cuomo in March to handle the COVID-19 pandemic.

"The public deserves to have checks and balances," Majority Leader Andrea Stewart-Cousins (D-Westchester) said Friday, the [New York Post reported](#). "This legislation creates a system with increased input while at the same time ensuring New Yorkers continue to be protected."

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Chinese Congress Lays Out 6.8% Defense Budget Hike for 2021, Paralleling Economic Growth by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

China's military spending is the world's second-largest after the US' colossal budget, but in contrast to Washington's goals of global power projection and engaging in multiple conflicts at once, the People's Liberation Army has defined its role as fundamentally defensive.

A draft budget report issued at the opening of the annual session of China's National People's Congress on Friday includes another substantial military budget increase for 2021 that, while higher than last year's increase, roughly parallels its projected economic growth.

According to [the Global Times](#), China's defense budget is slated to increase by 6.8% this year, to 1.35 trillion yuan (\$209 billion), which is a larger growth than in 2020, when it saw a 6.6% hike. This roughly follows [anticipated economic growth](#) "above 6%" this year, according to Premier Li Keqiang, who introduced the budget proposals.

In other words, defense spending will remain at roughly 1.3% of China's gross domestic product, which is far below the world average of 2.6% of GDP, even though Beijing has the world's second-largest budget in terms of US dollar equivalent. By comparison, the US' \$740 billion defense budget, which does not include further discretionary bills or the nuclear weapons budget, is about 3.5% of its GDP.

China's fiscal year runs from January to December, unlike the US' fiscal year which runs from October to September.

"Maintaining a proper and steady increase in defense spending is needed to safeguard our sovereignty and development interests, fulfill China's international responsibility and obligations, and promote the transformation of the Chinese military with Chinese characteristics," Zhang Yesui, who served as spokesperson for the NPC session, told reporters Thursday.

"In China's case, we are committed to the path of peaceful development. Our defense policy is defensive in nature. The efforts to strengthen our national defense do not target or threaten any other country," he added.

The increase is keeping in line with plans paid out by the Communist Party of China's 19th Central Committee plenary sessions in October, which made "making significant strides in the modernization of national defense and armed forces in the next five years" a primary goal for the country's 14th Five Year Plan, which begins this year. That session further laid out the goal of total defense modernization by 2035.

Expansion and Reorganization

According to Global Times, the budget hike will boost military training, preparedness and mobilization systems, as well as improve its strategic readiness by improving the military's layout of defense-related science, technology and industry.

In terms of hardware, the People's Liberation Army Navy is expected to debut its third aircraft carrier this year, an advanced warship with China's first aircraft catapult that is presently under construction in Shanghai. The Navy is also looking to procure more of the large Type 055 missile cruisers and could possibly begin "movement" on the Type 054B frigate, which will feature an integrated propulsion system, according to a December [Global Times report](#).

By 2025, the PLAN aims to have another five [Type 075 amphibious assault ships](#) in addition to its present three; eight more Type 055 cruisers; another 20 Type 054A frigates; and to have made large strides toward fielding the [Type 076 assault carrier](#) proposed last year, according to [The Diplomat](#).

China's J-20 stealth fighter entered mass production last year, meaning its numbers will dramatically increase this year. According to [the Economic Times](#), Chengdu Aircraft Corporation has set up a fourth production line of J-20s, meaning the company can turn out four new aircraft every month, or 48 per year.

Global Times also reported that a new Chinese fighter jet could debut this year. The outlet speculated this to be Shenyang's FC-31, in the past also erroneously called the J-31, another fifth-generation design believed to be the subject of [new tests since June](#) 2020 aimed at turning it into a carrier-based fighter. That would make China the only nation apart from the US to

operate two fifth-generation fighters; Russia is the third nation to fly such advanced jets, but only has the Su-57 at present. Fifth-generation fighters have stealth capability, advanced radars, and “supercruise” capability, among other unique features.

In addition to these new projects, China’s hypersonic missile programs are advancing and a [new stealth bomber](#) known provisionally as the H-20 could also debut this year. [Sputnik has reported](#) on the steady development of what is likely to be an air-launched hypersonic missile carried under a modified H-6N bomber.

Rising Threats

China’s military found itself pressed on several fronts in 2020, ranging from the tense and deadly [standoff with India](#) high in the Himalayan mountains to regular confrontations with US military aircraft and warships in the [South China Sea](#), where the US has inserted itself into a regional dispute between several nations over overlapping island claims.

Washington has also sold an unprecedented amount of [weapons to Taiwan](#), an autonomous island just off the coast of mainland China that Beijing considers to be a province in rebellion. A new national defense law implemented in June, which for the first time included Hong Kong Autonomous Region, also prompted [sanctions from Washington](#) and denunciations of what the Trump administration called the city’s loss of autonomy.

In terms of long-term strategy, it is now clear that the United States considers [China its primary adversary](#). Numerous documents from the [National Security Council](#), the Pentagon, and the [US State Department](#) confirm this strategic shift, and the administration of US President Joe Biden has verified it will not only continue the path staked out by former US President Donald Trump, but even expand it.

Amid accusations by the US and its allies that Beijing was seeking aggressive confrontation and expansion, China’s new National Defense Law that took effect in January specifically articulated the [military’s defensive nature](#), which Zhang rearticulated in his Thursday comments.

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China Returns to Form With ‘Conservative’ Economic Growth Target of ‘Above 6%’ for 2021 by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

From 5G internet to artificial intelligence, China’s storming of the global technology markets in recent years has provoked a defensive response by the United States, which has heavily targeted Chinese firms with tariffs, sanctions and trade blacklists.

After a year of not setting specific growth targets, Beijing has planned for more than 6% economic growth in 2021, according to documents submitted at the National People’s Congress on Friday.

China’s national legislature has convened its annual session in Beijing, at which it sets the core spending priorities for the year and signs off on government plans in various fields. Premier Li Keqiang submitted budgetary documents for the NPC’s approval on Friday that included “above 6%” growth in gross national product and a 6.8% growth in the [country’s defense budget](#) this year - a goal [the Global Times](#), a subsidiary of the Communist Party of China-owned paper People’s Daily, described as “conservative.”

At this time last year, China was gripped by the worst of the COVID-19 outbreak, which was declared a global pandemic just weeks later. As a result, the NPC was reluctant to set definitive economic goals for the year - the first time it has ever abstained from the practice.

"In setting this target, we have taken into account the recovery of economic activity. A target of over 6 percent will enable all of us to devote full energy to promoting reform, innovation, and high-quality development," Li told the NPC, which consists of some 2,900 representatives sent from across the country. Just short of 2,100 of them are from the Communist Party of China, while the other 800 come from roughly half a dozen other parties in a united front with the CPC, as well as several independent parties.

Last fall, the CPC Central Committee unveiled the structure of the country's 14th Five-Year Plan, the socialist economic planning strategy that will underpin the economy from 2021 through 2025. The plan called for greater emphasis on ["technological self-reliance"](#) alongside a robust plan to continue both the country's fight against climate change and its steady economic growth, which continued uninterrupted for four decades until the first quarter of 2020, when the COVID-19 outbreak heralded a national shutdown to combat the virus.

Other more specific targets included creating 11 million new urban jobs this year; keeping consumer price indices at 3% and the urban unemployment rate at 5.5%; and reaching a grain output of more than 650 million metric tons, the Global Times reported.

The five-year plan and the 2021 budget aim to maintain China's status as number-one manufacturer worldwide in terms of output. According to the [South China Morning Post](#), the eight priority areas identified in the budget are [rare earth metals](#) and specific materials; robotics; aircraft engines; new energy vehicles [and smart cars](#); advanced medical equipment and medicines including [several COVID-19 vaccines](#); agricultural machinery; equipment used in the shipbuilding, aviation and high-speed rail industries; and industrial uses for Beidou, the country's satellite navigation system that [launched the last](#) of its 35-satellite constellation last June.

The goal of at least 6% is still well below what economic forecasters have predicted for the East Asian country. Having successfully kept COVID-19 under control since last spring, China's economy has already rebounded substantially from its shutdown, setting export records as 2020 drew to a close and the country supplied much of the globe with the tools it needed to fight the disease and weather the social shutdowns. [CNBC reported](#) in December that estimates for China's GDP growth in 2021 have ranged from a low of 7.8% to a high of 9%.

China's state-owned enterprises (SOEs) played a critical role in that recovery, bouncing back much more quickly than private industry. In response, Hao Peng, chair of the State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission (SASAC), [urged late last year](#) that the country's central SOEs be formed into a "'national team' that can provide solid support for economic and social development."

However, to further the recovery of the worst-hit parts of the private sector, the budget also calls for a 30% increase in bank loans to small businesses as part of a "targeted support" program. [Meanwhile, Li said](#) the government would act to stop monopolistic behavior by tech companies and strengthen its control over banks and financial institutions to ensure they "serve the real economy as they should do."

On Thursday [ahead of the Congress](#), China Development Bank announced a \$62 billion loan plan to support "emerging technologies" and an Integrated Circuit Industry Investment Fund to support chipmakers targeted by US sanctions in recent months.

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Biden Extends National Emergency, Sanctions With Respect to Iran
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The US maintains 31 states of emergency concerning different nations and issues, granting the chief executive extremely wide-ranging powers, but none has persisted for longer than that against the Islamic Republic of Iran, which shrugged off a US-backed dictator 42 years ago. On Friday, US President Joe Biden extended the state of emergency with respect to Iran, put in place by US President Jimmy Carter in 1979 during Iran's Islamic Revolution. Iran's actions and policies "continue to pose an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security, foreign policy, and economy of the United States," Biden said in [a Friday notice](#), accusing Tehran of "proliferation and development of missiles and other asymmetric and conventional weapons capabilities," maintaining a "network and campaign of regional aggression," supporting "terrorist groups" and for the "malign activities of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps."

According to [a separate Friday letter](#) sent to Senate President Kamala Harris and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-CA), Biden technically extended a 1995 emergency declaration, which prohibited investment in Iranian oil companies or in Iran's petroleum deposits. However, such a state of emergency has existed since 1979, when the Iranian Revolution overthrew Mohammed Reza Shah, the pro-Western [monarch whose rule](#) the US and UK had secured against a populist movement led by Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadeq 26 years earlier.

"The actions and policies of the Government of Iran continue to pose an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security, foreign policy, and economy of the United States," the notice states. It enables the seizure of Iranian government assets and the imposition of economic sanctions against the Iranian economy.

The move comes amid an ongoing crisis over the [United States' possible return](#) to the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), an eight-party deal in which Iran agreed to strict limits on its uranium refining in exchange for the lowering of international sanctions against its economy. In 2018, the US unilaterally pulled out, with then-US President Donald Trump claiming Iran had violated the deal - something no other party to the deal agreed with and did not follow Trump's cutting off of trade and return of sanctions.

In response, Iran began reducing its commitments to the deal, increasing the quality and quantity of uranium it refines and limiting the ability of International Atomic Energy Agency inspectors to perform surprise inspections. After Biden took office in January, he signaled a willingness to return to the deal, but now the two nations have reached an impasse as each insists the other make the first move.

It also comes in the wake of a US airstrike on [a military depot](#) in eastern Syria last month that [US intelligence claimed](#) was operated by Kata'ib Hezbollah and Kata'ib Sayyid al Shuhada. The militias are part of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces, a collection of militias that formed the

backbone of Iraq and Iran's fight against Daesh, but which Washington has claimed now operate as "Iranian proxies."

The airstrike was in response to a rocket attack in Erbil that killed an American civilian contractor and injured several other people.

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US Indo-Pacific Command Seeks Doubling of Budget, Ring of Missile Sites Off Chinese Coast - Report

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

China has set a goal of becoming a "fully developed nation" and "a global leader" by 2049, the centennial of its socialist revolution, but the US has accused the 1.3 billion-strong country of plotting to overturn the world order it has carefully constructed in its favor.

In a five-year investment plan submitted by the head of Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM) to Congress this week, commander Adm. Philip Davidson asked for the annual budget to more than double to \$4.7 billion, for a total of \$27.4 billion by 2027.

In a copy of the plan viewed [by USNI News](#), INDOPACOM asks for "the fielding of an Integrated Joint Force with precision-strike networks west of the International Date Line along the First Island Chain, integrated air missile defense in the Second Island Chain, and a distributed force posture that provides the ability to preserve stability, and if needed, dispense and sustain combat operations for extended periods."

The First Island Chain refers to the [string of archipelagoes](#) just off the east coast of the Asian mainland stretching from the Kamchatka Peninsula in the north through the Kuril Islands, Japan, the Ryukyu Islands, Taiwan, the Philippines, and Borneo, and represents the area in which China [would attempt to deny](#) US forces safe access in the event of a shooting war. The Second Island Chain is a smaller string of islands that includes the Marianas Islands, Guam, and parts of Indonesia.

Pacific Deterrence Initiative

The foundation of the audacious proposal is the [Pacific Deterrence Initiative](#), a program introduced in the 2021 National Defense Authorization Act and modeled on the European Deterrence Initiative responsible for [placing huge amounts](#) of NATO weaponry on Russia's western border.

The US has about 132,000 troops stationed across the Indo-Pacific theater, with 28,000 garrisoning South Korea and another 55,000 at several bases across Japan. Several thousand more are based on Guam, on the eastern edge of the East China Sea, a few thousand more in Australia and scattered across Thailand, Singapore and the Philippines in small groups, with the rest being based in Hawaii.

Last year, the US Marine Corps began [a near-total overhaul](#) in force structure, drawing up plans to shed much of its heavy land equipment, and even part of its air forces, in exchange for a new generation of ships and mobile missile systems.

The restructuring calls for a 300% increase in the Marine Corps' rocket artillery capable of launching any of several long-range missiles currently in development or production including the Long-Range Anti-Ship Missile (LRASM), the Naval Strike Missile (NSM), the Maritime Strike Tomahawk cruise missile, and the Precision Strike Missile.

Under a new doctrine of [Expeditionary Advance Base Operations](#) (EASO), such missile systems would be part of a rapid deployment by the massive CH-53K King Stallion helicopter to bases along the First Island Chain in order to establish a no-go zone for Chinese ships and aircraft in order to limit their movement.

Many of the missiles have only been made possible by the US' withdrawal from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty in 2019. The 1987 bilateral deal limited the ranges of [Russian and American land-based](#) surface-to-surface missiles in an attempt to reduce the likelihood of a hasty counter-strike made in error. The US claimed Russia had violated the deal, but even before the treaty lapsed, the Pentagon had [sunk more than \\$1 billion](#) into developing treaty-breaking missiles and just days after the treaty lapsed, began testing such weapons.

Local Resistance to US Missile Bases

However, while EASO is aimed primarily at establishing temporary mobile bases, the Pentagon has also been pursuing more permanent missile installations along the First Island Chain, receiving significant pushback in doing so.

In Japan, local resistance to the Aegis Ashore missile system, which is ostensibly an anti-missile defense against the Democratic People's Republic of Korea but which can also be configured to fire offensive strike missiles, has [caused Tokyo to cancel](#) both planned installations in Yamaguchi and Akita Prefectures last year.

Last June, Okinawa Governor Danny Tamaki, whose island hosts several huge US air bases, [vowed resistance to plans](#) to install missile sites on the island. "If there is such a plan, I can easily imagine fierce opposition from Okinawa residents," he told the [Los Angeles Times](#).

In Seongju, South Korea, where the US based several long-range Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) ballistic missile interceptors in 2017, local resistance has forced the Pentagon to [cancel its redeployment plans](#), as well. US [officials have boasted](#) THAAD's high-powered X-band radar can track an object "the size of a baseball" almost 3,000 miles away, meaning from South Korea, it can see across China.

'Malign Actor'

In 2018, the Trump administration announced a shift in Washington's strategic priorities away from the War on Terror and toward ["inter-state strategic competition"](#) with Russia and China. According to the Pentagon and White House, the two rising powers [are "malign actors"](#) seeking to overturn the US-dominated "rules-based" world order that emerged at the end of the Cold War.

Since then, the US state has [drawn up extensive plans](#) for a long-term confrontation with China that includes [attempts to isolate](#) it politically, undermine it internally, and inculcate in the US population the reasons China must be fought.

By contrast, China has said its goals are not to upend the global order but to join it as a modern, industrial power after a 100-year absence due to Western and Japanese imperialist domination and underdevelopment. In amendments to the country's National Defense Law [adopted in January](#), China specifically identified the role of the People's Liberation Army as defensive.

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Videos: Creator of Viral Tom Cruise Deep-Fakes Reveals Secrets
by [Evan Craighead](#)

Belgian visual effects specialist Chris Ume's TikTok account "DeepTomCruise" has amassed more than 1.1 million likes and over 330,000 followers in less than two weeks. The viral attention of the account using US actor Tom Cruise's likeness has sparked concerns over the future of synthetic media and artificial intelligence (AI).

Amid newfound fame, Ume premiered a new video on YouTube Friday, giving users a behind-the-scenes peek at how he, and Cruise impersonator Miles Fisher, went about the impersonation project.

The brief clip begins with an introduction delivered by Fisher, portraying Cruise, and shows highlights from videos originally published [on TikTok](#), side-by-side comparisons, and cutouts showing the deep-fake production process.

However, the Belgian VFX specialist also spoke with several outlets this week regarding the creation of his deep-fake videos and his view of synthetic media.

In an interview with [The Verge](#) he revealed that every deep-fake took several weeks and was produced using an open-source DeepFaceLab algorithm and video-editing software.

"You can't do it by just pressing a button,"

The VFX specialist explained to The Guardian that the project came about after he helped create a fake 2020 campaign video for Fisher.

"A month later, he contacted me again, and said: 'Let's make a funny video ... I'll film myself in my garden and then you just make me look like Tom Cruise,'" he said.

"I'd like to show people the technical possibilities of these things. I don't intend to use it in any way where I would upset people – I just want to show them what's possible in a few years," Ume told the outlet.

The VFX specialist also suggested the implementation of "laws to help with the responsible use of AI and deep-fakes."

Interestingly enough, the real Tom Cruise has made his [own TikTok](#) since the viral deep-fakes went viral. As of this article's publication, the account has no content, but has been verified by the social media platform.

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Detroit Mayor Backpedals After Rejecting J&J Vaccine Shipment, Now On Board for 'Next Allocation'
by [Evan Craighead](#)

Earlier this week, Michigan health officer Linda Vail told residents of Ingham, Michigan, that "this is not a time to be picky about which vaccine" you receive. More than 80,000 doses of the Johnson & Johnson single-shot vaccine have been delivered to the state.

Democratic Detroit Mayor Mike Duggan on Friday appeared to reverse course after declining a shipment of 6,200 doses of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine, despite its recent emergency authorization from the Food and Drug Administration.

"I have full confidence that the Johnson & Johnson vaccine is both safe and effective," Mayor Mike Duggan remarked in a statement, as reported by [NBC News](#).

"We are making plans now for Johnson & Johnson to be a key part of our expansion of vaccine centers and are looking forward to receiving Johnson & Johnson vaccines in the next allocation."

Duggan declared later Friday that he "always intended to distribute Johnson & Johnson once the demand warranted it."

This comes just a day after he defended his decision to reject the potentially life-saving vaccines.

"So, Johnson & Johnson is a very good vaccine. Moderna and Pfizer are the best," Duggan said. "And I am going to do everything I can to make sure the residents of the city of Detroit get the best."

Clinical trials show that, after both shots, Moderna and Pfizer-BioNTech vaccines are around 95% effective at preventing moderate to severe symptoms of the novel coronavirus. The single-shot Johnson & Johnson vaccine is said to be 72% effective at protecting those in the US from COVID-19.

Results examined after a four-week period showed only a 66% effectiveness overall, with a 66% protection rate in Latin America and only a 57% rate of protection in South Africa, according to a [January release](#) by Johnson & Johnson.

Moderna and Pfizer-BioNTech shots are administered two weeks between one another, while the Johnson & Johnson vaccine only requires one appointment.

"At this point, everybody in the city of Detroit who is eligible, who wants a vaccine can get one," Duggan said Thursday. "The day may come in March or April when every single Moderna and Pfizer is committed, and we still have people who need a vaccine. And at that point we will set up a Johnson & Johnson center."

It's worth noting that [78.3%](#) of Detroiters are Black or African-American, according to the US Census. The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports Black or African-Americans are [2.9x](#) more likely to be hospitalized due to COVID-19, and 1.9x more likely to die from the contagious disease, when compared to white Americans.

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Biden Extends US National Emergency With Respect to Iran - White House

WASHINGTON, March 5 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden extended for another year the national emergency declared with respect to Iran in 1995, a legal basis for multiple rounds of

sanctions related to weapons proliferation and support for militant proxies, the White House announced.

"The national emergency declared on March 15, 1995, must continue in effect beyond March 15, 2021. Therefore, in accordance with section 202(d) of the National Emergencies Act (50 U.S.C. 1622(d)), I am continuing for 1 year the national emergency with respect to Iran declared in Executive Order 12957," the presidential notice said.

Biden said that Iran's actions and policies "continue to pose an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security, foreign policy, and economy of the United States." He accused Iran of proliferating and developing "missiles and other asymmetric and conventional weapons capabilities," maintaining "network and campaign of regional aggression," supporting "terrorist groups and... malign activities of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps."

Executive Order 12957, signed by President Bill Clinton on March 15, 1995, "prohibits certain transactions with respect to the development of Iranian petroleum resources in Iran."

The sanctions were signed less than two weeks after Conoco reached a deal with Iran to develop offshore oil fields. Within a few days, the \$1 billion deal would fall apart, prompting Tehran to accuse Washington of betraying its free trade policy, the New York Times reported on March 20, 1995 citing an Iranian economic analyst with close knowledge of the deal.

In May, Clinton expanded the sanctions to include with order 12959, which prohibits the import of all Iranian goods to the United States.

The order signed Friday is not related to the one declared on November 14, 1979, 12170, which was in connection with the hostage crisis.

blinker spoke to armenian prime minister about respecting democracy, welcomed efforts to reach political settlement to Karabakh conflict - state dept

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Two Ukrainian Nationals Extradited to US on Money Laundering Charges - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 5 (Sputnik) - Two Ukrainian nationals were extradited to the United States from the Czech Republic on money laundering charges, the US Department of Justice said.

"Two members of an international organized network that provided cash-out and money laundering services to cyber actors were extradited from the Czech Republic to Dallas," the Justice Department said in a statement on Friday .

Viktor Vorontsov, 39, and Slate Hanska Muzhuk, 40, were allegedly members of an international organized network providing cash-out and money laundering services to cyber actors who used stolen bank login credentials to initiate fraudulent electronic funds transfers from the victims' bank accounts.

The indictment said seven electronic fund transfers were made in 2017 totaling almost \$500,000. Both suspects were charged in the Northern District of Texas with conspiracy to launder funds.

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US Stocks Up After 3-Day Drop on February Jobs Report; Nasdaq Extends Weekly Slide

NEW YORK, March 5 (Sputnik) - Wall Street closed higher on Friday after a strong US jobs report for February snapped a three-day selloff on equity markets, even as tech stocks posted a third straight weekly loss.

The Dow Jones Industrial Average, the S&P 500 and Nasdaq Composite indices rose by an average of 1.8 percent each, after the US Labor Department reported a growth of 379,000 jobs for February versus forecasts for an expansion of 182,000 jobs.

"US stocks were all over the place following the stronger-than-expected employment report," Ed Moya, analyst at New York brokerage OANDA, said. "But the growth outlook is looking better [and the] pullback in stocks could be nearing an end as US growth exceptionalism should start to attract investors."

Despite rallying 1.6 percent on Friday, Nasdaq, which includes stocks of tech giants such as Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Netflix and Google, lost 2.1 percent on the week, extended last week's loss of nearly 5 percent and the previous week's decline of 1.6 percent.

Nasdaq has led losses on Wall Street since last month on concerns that some of the stocks on the index were overvalued. The past three weeks have been tough for the index, which posted heady gains between October and January. Year-to-date, Nasdaq is up just a quarter percent, after rising nearly 10 percent on the year when it hit record highs in mid-February.

The Dow index, the broadest gauge of the New York Stock Exchange, rose 1.9 percent on the day and 1.8 percent on the week. Year-to-date, the Dow is up almost 3 percent. The S&P 500, a barometer for the top 500 US stocks, closed up 2.0 percent for Friday while gaining 0.8 percent on the week. Year-to-date, the S&P is up 2.3 percent.

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US Seizes Over 65,000 Fake N95 Masks Arriving From Colombia - Customs Agency

WASHINGTON, March 5 (Sputnik) - US federal agents at Chicago's O'Hare airport seized more than 65,000 3M N95 type masks which turned out to be counterfeit, Customs and Border Protection (CBP) said in a release.

"Officers... recently seized 136 boxes containing suspicious 3M N95 type masks with a 3M trademark," the release said on Friday. "[The] 65,280 3M N95 masks... [had] a Domestic Value of over \$401,000."

CBP said the shipments arrived from Colombia and were en route to a company based in the US state of Virginia.

"These counterfeit masks are extremely dangerous and provide a false sense of security to American consumers," Assistant Area Port Director-Chicago, Hans Leiterman said as quoted by the release on Friday. "Unfortunately, there is no shortage of bad actors out there trying to take advantage of consumers during a global pandemic."

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has been actively exploited by criminal enterprises attempting to sell unapproved and unsafe medical protective equipment while CBP's mission was to protect consumers and reduce costs, the release said.

COVID-19 has become the biggest challenge for the medical and pharmaceutical industry in 2020. The first months of the fight against the pandemic were marked by severe shortages of personal protective equipment which was overcome only in a few months.

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US Considers Housing Unaccompanied Migrant Children at Military Base - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, March 5 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is considering housing unaccompanied migrant children in a military base in the US state of Virginia as their growing numbers put the existing capacities to the limit, Defense Department spokesman John Kirby said during a press briefing.

"The Secretary [of Defense Lloyd Austin] was supportive of having HHS [US Department of Health and Human Services] visit Fort Lee to examine and do a site survey," Kirby told reporters on Friday.

Experts from the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) visited Fort Lee, a US Army facility near Richmond, earlier this week about the possibility of accommodating migrant children there but have not yet submitted a request to do so.

Kirby promised that the Defense Department will duly consider such a request and make "the best decision we can," adding that no other bases were surveyed for this purpose.

As of February 18, there were about 6,800 unaccompanied children under the care of the HHS Office of Refugee Resettlement.

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Mars Perseverance Rover Completes Test Drive, Covers 21 Feet - NASA

WASHINGTON, March 5 (Sputnik) - The Mars Perseverance Rover completed its first test drive on the Red Planet, a 21 feet mobility trial, NASA said.

"This was our first chance to 'kick the tires' and take Perseverance out for a spin. The rover's six-wheel drive responded superbly. We are now confident our drive system is good to go, capable of taking us wherever the science leads us over the next two years," rover mobility engineer Anais Zarifian said in a NASA press release on Friday.

The drive lasted about 33 minutes, with Perseverance moving forward for 13 feet from its landing spot two weeks ago, turning in place 150 degrees and then backing up 8 feet to a new, temporary parking space, the release said.

Before and during the drive, Perseverance continued to transmit pictures from its 24 cameras, about 7,000 images since its February 18 landing, the release also said.

Controllers have since checked out the rover's ground penetrating radar, deployed two wind sensors and unstowed the rover's 7-foot-long robotic arm, the release added.

The rover will search for evidence of ancient microbial life, collect rocks to be returned to Earth and explore the Red Planets' geology and climate to help pave the way for human missions, according to the release.

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Majority of Canadian Businesses Worry About Survival in Coming Year - Statistics Agency

TORONTO, March 5 (Sputnik) - The majority of Canadian businesses are worried they might not survive the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the state statistics agency said.

"Over half (51.3%) of businesses did not know how long they could continue to operate at their current level of revenue and expenditures before considering closure or bankruptcy, while one-tenth (10.3%) of businesses reported they could continue for less than 12 months,"

Statistics Canada said in its first quarter business conditions survey on Friday.

The concerns are most pronounced in the accommodation and food services industry, where a quarter of businesses says they could continue operations for less than 12 months in the current conditions before shuttering doors forever. More than 23 percent of arts, entertainment and recreation businesses said the same.

Furthermore, nearly half - 46.4 percent - of business said they did not know how much longer they could manage before laying off staff, while more than one in five said that they have less than 12 months before layoffs begin.

Overall, nearly 42 percent of all businesses are bracing for a decline in profitability in the next three months and close to a third of companies are anticipating sales declines in the same period.

The results of a recent study conducted by the Canadian Federation of Independent Business (CFIB) revealed that a sixth of Canadian small businesses impacted by the COVID-19-related restrictions are contemplating closing for good, potentially putting 2.4 million jobs in jeopardy. Persistent lockdown orders in Canada in combination with an underwhelming federal vaccine rollout have sparked frustration among the hundreds of businesses owners, who have been forced to close their doors for months.

Last month, despite facing steep fines of up to \$79,000, more than 500 small business owners, in at least eight out of ten Canadian provinces, reopened in defiance of strict lockdown measures in place across much of the country.

Canadian business owners, some of whom participated in the protest, told Sputnik that the pandemic is crushing small businesses, while governments roll out confusing new guidelines and relief programs that are insufficient.

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Pentagon Assessing Its Networks For Possible Damage After Microsoft Breach - Spokesman WASHINGTON, March 5 (Sputnik) - The US Defense Department is currently evaluating whether its networks sustained any damage earlier this week in an attack on Microsoft's email service, Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said.

"We are aware of the Microsoft threat intelligence center's report. We are currently assessing our networks right now for any evidence of impact," Kirby said in a press briefing on Thursday.

"We are also... taking all necessary steps to identify and remedy any possible issues related to the situation."

Microsoft in a blog post on Tuesday said it uncovered exploits that a China-based group was able to use to access email accounts and install malware.

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US Orders Cuts in Toxic Heavy Metals in Baby Foods - Health Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 5 (Sputnik) - US baby food manufacturers were told to measure levels of toxins in infant foods in preparation for regulatory push to cut levels of heavy metals such as lead, cadmium, mercury and arsenic, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) said on Friday.

"Today, we issued a letter to industry reminding manufacturers of these types of foods [and] of their existing responsibilities related to these efforts," the FDA said in a press release.

"Secondly, the agency is announcing that we'll soon be putting into action a plan aimed at reducing toxic elements in foods for babies and young children to levels as low as is reasonably achievable."

The FDA action followed a report by the House Oversight Committee last month showing baby foods with levels of lead, cadmium, mercury and arsenic dozens of times higher than limits allowed in bottled drinking water sold in the US.

In addition to notifying companies of existing laws targeting chemical hazards in food, the FDA letter also disclosed agency plans for a new regulatory offensive targeting baby food makers.

The FDA said its plans include setting limits for contaminants in key foods, increasing inspections and sampling of foods for babies and young children and increased enforcement.

The report noted that existing regulations require baby food makers to test ingredients for heavy metals but not the finished products consumed by infants.

The letter said the FDA will to set safe limits for contaminants, based on science, increase inspections and sampling of products.

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US Will Take 2 Years to Get Back on Track at Current Rate of Jobs Growth - Biden

WASHINGTON, March 5 (Sputnik) - The US economy could take as long as two years to get back on track with the current rate of jobs growth in the country, President Joe Biden said as he pushed for the passage of his \$1.9 trillion coronavirus relief plan.

"Today's jobs report shows that the American Rescue plan is urgently needed," Biden said, referring to the Labor Department's report of a 379,000 jobs growth in February that still left the economy with 9.5 million fewer jobs than a year ago. "At that rate it would take 2 years to get us back on track."

The president said his COVID-19 relief plan, which cleared the House of Representatives last week and is now seeking approval from the Senate before becoming law, was integral in getting the country back on track with personal checks of \$1,400 for Americans and help for small businesses.

"The rescue plan is absolutely essential to turning this around, getting kids back to school safely, giving a lifeline to small businesses and getting the upper hand in COVID-19," the president said in remarks circulated by the White House press corp pool. "We can't go one step forward and two steps backward. These gains [in jobs] are going to slow."

The United States lost more than 21 million jobs between March and April, at the height of business lockdowns forced by the virus. At least 10 million of those jobs have not returned, with the US economy shrinking 3.5 percent in 2020 after a 2.2 percent growth in 2019.

Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell said on Thursday he did not expect the United States to return anytime this year or so soon to maximum employment, which will be one the central bank's criteria for raising interest rates. Under the Fed's definition, maximum employment is achieved when the jobless rate is at 4.0 percent or lower.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, March 5 (Sputnik) -

BIDEN-VON DER LEYEN TALKS

* US President Joe Biden and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen in a phone call on Friday agreed to coordinate their policies toward China, Russia, Belarus, Ukraine and the Western Balkans, the White House said in a statement.

* Biden and von der Leyen agreed to stop the tariffs related to the trade disputes between US and EU aircraft manufacturers for four months, the White House said.

IRAN NUCLEAR AGREEMENT

* Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif said on Friday that he was going to present a specific plan of diplomatic action for the realization of the nuclear deal soon.

* Russia calls to convene an urgent meeting to return the United States to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action and restore Iran's obligations under the agreement, Russian Ambassador to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Mikhail Ulyanov said.

CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

* A delegation of the Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF) held talks with Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz in Vienna on Friday and discussed the Russian vaccine Sputnik V among other topics, Russian Embassy in Vienna representative Lev Terekhov told Sputnik.

* Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyanin announced that the obligatory self-isolation for people aged 65 and over, and those suffering from chronic health conditions would be lifted on March 8 in light of the decreasing coronavirus cases.

* The COVAX Facility, the global COVID-19 vaccine distribution initiative, has delivered more than 20 million vaccine doses to a total of 20 countries, World Health Organization Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said.

MYANMAR DEVELOPMENTS

* The European Union suspended all Myanmar assistance programs after the country's military seized power and EU member states are currently reviewing further cooperation, a spokesperson for the European Commission told Sputnik on Friday.

* UN Special Envoy for Myanmar Christine Schraner Burgener urged the UN Security Council to be robust in pushing on the Myanmar military to stop its violent crackdown on peaceful protesters.

STABBING ATTACK IN WALES

* Police and emergency service crews are dealing on Friday with a "serious incident" involving a number of casualties in the village of Treorchy, the South Wales Police has confirmed

* One person is feared dead and several injured in a stabbing attack in the South Wales village of Treorchy, media reported.

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US Earmarks \$24Mln to Research Removal of Carbon Dioxide From Air - Energy Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 5 (Sputnik) - The US plans to begin research on potential methods of large-scale extraction of carbon from the atmosphere with \$24 million in research grants as part of the Biden administration's campaign against climate change, the Energy Department said on Friday.

"If we can figure out how to remove polluting emissions directly from the air, it would be a game changer in America's fight against climate change," Energy Secretary Jennifer Granholm said in a press release.

The funding will support the breakthroughs needed to address the limitations of currently available technologies, and develop entirely new and more effective approaches for direct removal of CO2 from ambient air, the release said.

National laboratories, universities, industry, and nonprofit organizations will be eligible to apply for funding from the \$24 million program, the release added.

Several US companies have announced plans to experiment with atmospheric carbon capture, and artist renderings of potential projects available on the internet often depict skyscraper-size stacks of giant fans.

However, media reports indicate that existing technology is too expensive for practical use.

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US Military Should Leave Afghanistan, Middle East - House Armed Services Chair

WASHINGTON, March 5 (Sputnik) - The US armed forces should pull out of the almost 20-years-long Afghanistan conflict as early as this year and reduce its presence in the Middle East and Africa, House Armed Services Committee Chairman Adam Smith told a Brookings Institution podcast on Friday.

"Is there a scenario for the US to get out of Afghanistan this year? Yes," Smith said. "We're not going to be out by May 1, [but] it would be enormously important for US foreign policy if we could get out of Afghanistan. There is concern about the degree to which the United States has relied on its military to impose its foreign policy on the world."

The United States should also make major reductions in its military presence in the Middle East and reduce its forces in sub-Saharan Africa, Smith continued.

"I think the Middle East is one of the best places we can look to make reductions [while] continuing to support European and the Indo-Pac [region] defense initiative as well. We need to find a way to be less present. .. Containing Iran is going to continue to be a priority," he said. In Africa, the United States did not need to deploy large forces but instead should maintain relatively small numbers of troops in different places to combat terrorist movements and to prevent China from "managing to sneak in there and build problematic alliances," Smith added.

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US to Conduct Battle Staff Exercise Next Week Across All Mission Areas - STRATCOM

WASHINGTON, March 5 (Sputnik) - The US military will conduct a battle staff drill next week across all mission areas to evaluate preparedness and enhance deterrence against a range of threats, Strategic Command said in a release on Friday.

"US Strategic Command will commence Exercise Global Lightning 21 next week, an annual battle staff exercise designed to train Department of Defense forces and assess joint operational readiness across all USSTRATCOM mission areas," the release said.

The key objective of the exercise is to create conditions for strategic deterrence against a variety of threats, the release added.

This year, the participants of the exercise will be US Strategic Command headquarters staff along with US European Command headquarters, and US Space Command.

US Strategic Command is one of eleven commands in the Department of Defense. It is located at Offutt Air Force Base in Nebraska. The list of the command's missions includes strategic deterrence, nuclear operations, space operations, missile defense.

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US House Armed Services Chair Wants Budget Cuts to 'Rat Hole' F-35 Fighter Program

WASHINGTON, March 5 (Sputnik) - US House Armed Services Committee Chairman Adam Smith on Friday said it is time to cut the budget of the controversial Lockheed Martin F-35 Lightning II Joint Strike Fighter program, calling it a money-guzzling "rat hole" that does not work well.

"I want to stop throwing money down that particular rat hole. I know it doesn't work particularly well," Smith said during a virtual event hosted by the Brookings Institutions.

Smith dismissed suggestions that the program is working better now after a series of initial problems. He said he would be happy to end all production on the F-35 immediately, but acknowledged that the option to do so did not exist.

"If I can trade the F-35 [and] take the [spending] cap hit in one year, that would be awesome but sadly we don't have that as an option. It's just painful. It just hurts. There's not an easy way out of it. ...The sustainment costs [of the aircraft] are brutal," he said.

The US Air Force and congressional budget appropriators need to develop a new mix of fighter attack aircraft that free the armed forces from having to rely on the F-35 for the next 35 years, Smith said.

During a press briefing on February 25, US Air Force Chief of Staff General Charles Brown compared the F-35 to an expensive sports car and said he wanted to keep such planes only for high-end missions. The Air Force planned to order 1,763 F-35As, but 15 years after the first F-35 flew, only 250 of them have been delivered.

Smith's House Armed Services Committee and its counterpart in the Senate are responsible for drafting the annual defense budget, and typically start work on the process after the president submits a wish-list of priorities to Congress. The process of drafting the budget for 2022 is expected to begin in the coming weeks.

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Ontario to Lift Stay-at-Home Orders in Toronto But City to Remain in Lockdown - Statement

TORONTO, March 5 (Sputnik) - The Canadian province of Ontario is lifting the existing COVID-19-induced stay-at-home order for the city of Toronto, a neighboring region and remote northern region as of March 8, the provincial government said on Friday.

However, Toronto and the neighboring Peel Region will remain in the "grey" zone of public health measures, meaning that the city and its neighbor remain in lockdown.

"Based on a general improvement in trends of key indicators, North Bay Parry Sound District will be returning to the Framework at the Red-Control level. Toronto Public Health and Peel Public Health are also making progress, but as their case rates still remain high, they will return to the Framework at the Grey-Lockdown level," Ontario's government said in a statement.

While the decision was met with lukewarm approval by the Canadian Federation of Independent Businesses (CFIB), the advocacy group said the announcement does not go far enough.

"Monday... will mark the first day ALL Ontario retailers will be allowed to reopen since late November. It also marks the end of Ontario's shameful 'big box' preference policy," CFIB President and CEO Dan Kelly said in a statement. "But far too many businesses remain entirely closed. As of Mar. 8, Toronto hair and nail salons will have been closed for over 200 days, gyms for over 270 and indoor dining for 280. They still have no timeframe to serve a single customer indoors."

Persistent lockdown orders in Canada in combination with an underwhelming federal vaccine rollout have sparked frustration among the hundreds of businesses owners, who have been forced to close their doors for months.

Last month, despite facing steep fines of up to \$79,000, more than 500 small business owners, in at least eight out of ten Canadian provinces, reopened in defiance of strict lockdown measures in place across much of the country.

Canadian business owners, some of whom participated in the protest, told Sputnik that the pandemic is crushing small businesses, while governments roll out confusing new guidelines and relief programs that are insufficient.

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US Envoy Discusses New Ideas to Support Afghan Peace Process - State Department

WASHINGTON, March 5 (Sputnik) - The United States is considering a range of initiatives to galvanize the Afghan peace process and discuss them with stakeholders during an ongoing visit of top American negotiator Zalmay Khalilzad to the region, State Department spokesman Ned Price told reporters on Friday.

"We are considering a number of different ideas that might accelerate the process forward. That's precisely what the Special Representative and his team have been doing first on the ground in Kabul and now on the ground in Doha and what they will continue doing," Price said at a daily briefing.

According to the Al Jazeera news channel, US Special Representative for Afghanistan has been drumming up support for a regional conference in Istanbul later this month.

Khalilzad began on Sunday his first regional tour since US President Joe Biden took office. He spoke to Afghan officials in Kabul and is visiting Qatar and other regional countries.

Talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban insurgency on ending a protracted war stalled this year as militant attacks continue unabated. The US was poised to pull troops from the country by May but now insists that a durable political settlement must first be achieved.

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Trudeau Says Actively Monitoring Vaccine Shipment Blocked by Italy

TORONTO, March 5 (Sputnik) - Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau on Friday said he is actively monitoring the situation in Europe where a novel coronavirus vaccine shipment destined for Australia was blocked by Italy.

On Thursday, Italy, in coordination with the European Union, has held up a shipment of 250,000 doses of the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine bound for Australia following a spat with the manufacturer over delayed deliveries to the bloc.

"It is obviously a situation we are following very closely," Trudeau said during a press briefing in response to a question about the blocked shipment.

However, the Prime Minister stressed that he has received assurances from top EU brass, including European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, that deliveries to Canada would not be affected.

Trudeau emphasized that in the coming weeks Canada would receive Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna deliveries – producers not currently experiencing production and distribution issues. Canada is not expecting AstraZeneca vaccine doses from European manufacturing facilities in the coming months, Trudeau added.

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US Condemns China's Continued Assaults on Hong Kong Democracy - State Department

WASHINGTON, March 5 (Sputnik) - The United States condemns China's continued assaults on Hong Kong's democracy amid Beijing's preparations to alter the special region's electoral system, US Department of State spokesperson Ned Price said in a press briefing on Friday. "The United States condemns the PRC's [People's Republic of China] continuing assault on democratic institutions in Hong Kong," Price said. "The reforms to Hong Kong's electoral system... are a direct attack on Hong Kong's autonomy, Hong Kong's freedoms and the democratic processes, limiting participation, reducing democratic representation and stifling political debate in order to defy the clear will of the people of Hong Kong and to deny their voice in their own government."

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Guterres Tells Egypt's Top Diplomat UN Available to Support Talks on GERD Dam - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, March 5 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres on Friday spoke over the telephone with Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Hassan Shoukry and informed him the world body stands ready to support Egypt's talks with Ethiopia and Sudan on the disputed Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Friday.

"The Secretary-General confirmed that the United Nations is available to support and participate in the African Union-led negotiation process on the [GERD], at the invitation of the Chairperson of the African Union, President Felix Tshisekedi, hoping the process will count on the full engagement of the parties in a serious negotiation," Dujarric said in a readout of the call. On Wednesday, Ethiopia signaled its readiness to engage in negotiations on the disputed dam with Egypt and Sudan.

The dam has been under construction since 2012 and would become the largest one in Africa when completed. However, the project triggered disputes with Egypt and Sudan as both countries fear the dam would undermine their water security. Earlier talks between the three countries on a final agreement to resolve the dispute had hit a deadlock.

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US Must Contain China Without 'Stumbling' Into Cold War - House Armed Services Chair

WASHINGTON, March 5 (Sputnik) - The United States must avoid starting a new Cold War with China despite the need to contain the Asian superpower, House Armed Services Committee (HASC) Chairman Adam Smith told a podcast hosted by the Brookings Institution on Friday. "China is the big issue which is taking on everyone's focus," Smith said. "We need to be very careful about stumbling into a Cold War with China... We struggle in a straight-on confrontation with China. I don't think its possible for the United States now to build a military that can dominate China."

The United States needed to continue coexisting and working with China on a wide spectrum of issues and could not at the same time regularly officially accuse Beijing of being the most evil regime on the planet, Smith said. The solution was to combine a commitment to coexistence with a policy of containment, he added.

"Containment has become a dirty word... we need to embrace containment and deterrence. There are alternatives to all out conflict," he said.

Smith also said US President Joe Biden "doesn't have any illusions about them."

In a speech delivered at the Department of State on Wednesday, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said the Biden administration was prepared to confront China wherever necessary and he said the US relationship with Beijing would be the "biggest geopolitical test" of the 21st century.

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Biden Believes Updating Authorizations for Military Force 'Long Overdue' - White House

WASHINGTON, March 5 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden agrees with Senator Tim Kaine that the congressional powers to authorize the use of military force (AUMF) need to be updated, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said in a press briefing on Friday.

"The President has been obviously a close ally and partner with Senator Kaine on a number of initiatives in the past. He agrees that the AUMF has been around for 20 years and it's long overdue for it to be updated," Psaki said.

Psaki said earlier that President Joe Biden backs the effort by senators to restrict presidential war powers by repealing two laws that have allowed US presidents to use military force around the globe

Biden intends to "ensure that the authorizations for the use of military force currently on the books are replaced with a narrow and specific framework that will ensure we can protect Americans from terrorist threats while ending the forever wars," Psaki said.

On Wednesday, US Senators Tim Kaine and Todd Young re-introduced their bipartisan bill to repeal the 1991 and 2002 authorizations for the use military force after Biden approved airstrikes against Iran-backed militias in eastern Syria last week. Their bill has the backing of several senators from both parties.

The US Constitution gives only Congress the power to wage war. But Congress gave the president broad war powers with the two resolutions - the 1991 AUMF gave the president the power to use US military force in the Gulf War and the 2001 AUMF approved using force against those responsible for the September 11 terror attacks.

Successive US presidents have broadly interpreted the AUMFs to send armed forces to countries around the world, including Afghanistan, Libya, Turkey, Georgia, Yemen, Djibouti, Kenya, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Iraq, Somalia, the Philippines and Cuba.

Biden's explanation that the strikes in Syria were "self-defense" in response to attacks by Iran-backed groups did not satisfy some members of Congress like Senator Kaine, who has demanded a briefing on the administration's legal justification for the attacks.

The repeal of the war powers resolutions would not impact ongoing US operations against the Islamic State terrorist group (banned in Russia), Kaine said after re-introducing the bill.

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Trudeau Says Pfizer Moving Up Delivery Vaccine Schedule to Canada

TORONTO, March 5 (Sputnik) - US drugmaker Pfizer is moving up its novel coronavirus vaccine delivery schedule to Canada, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said on Friday.

"Pfizer has informed us that we are able to move up the delivery of three and a half million doses from the summer into the next couple of months," Trudeau told reporters in Ottawa. Pfizer will deliver an additional 1.5 million doses before the end of March, Trudeau said, which will bring Canada's vaccine delivery total for the first quarter to eight million doses, up from an anticipated six million.

Canada is now slated to receive 12.8 million doses from Pfizer between April and June, the Prime Minister added.

Public Services and Procurement Anita Anand said that Canada will receive 117.9 million doses of COVID-19 vaccines from the four approved vaccine manufacturers, cumulatively.

To date, Canadian health regulators have approved four standalone vaccines against the deadly virus, including the Pfizer-BioNTech, Moderna, AstraZeneca-Oxford, and Johnson & Johnson vaccines, the latter of which received authorization earlier in the day.

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Fauci Warns of 4th Spike in COVID-19 Infections With New Variants Resistant to Vaccines

WASHINGTON, March 5 (Sputnik) - A pause in the recent decline in new coronavirus cases following the worse spike of the year-old pandemic leaves the United States in danger of yet another surge, possibly with deadlier mutations , National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases Director Anthony Fauci said Friday.

"We are starting to plateau [at] about 60,000 to 70,000 cases a day. When you have that much viral plateau it almost invariably means that you are at risk for another spike," Fauci said at the daily White House COVID-19 Task Force briefing.

Fauci said three previous peaks in the pandemic ended with new coronavirus cases plateauing at unacceptably higher rates - 20,000 in the spring, 40,000 in the summer, and 60,000 to 70,000 today - a trend he blamed on premature easing of restrictions.

The latest baseline "favors the mutation and the evolution of variants," as the virus undergoes a "selection process" to protect itself from antibodies produced by vaccines and earlier infections, he said.

The drop in new cases from about 250,000 in early January to the present level has prompted more than half of US states to ease, and in some cases completely end, existing restrictions, according to media reports.

Vaccines have been shown less effective against variants that have emerged thus far - from Brazil and South Africa - with vaccine manufacturers scrambling to create variant specific booster shots or new vaccines, according to Fauci.

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Microsoft Breach Remains Ongoing Threat, Administration Looks at Next Steps - White House

WASHINGTON, March 5 (Sputnik) - The Microsoft breach remains an ongoing active threat and the Biden administration is looking at the next steps to address it, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said in a press briefing on Friday.

"This is a significant vulnerability that can have far reaching impacts. First and foremost, this is an active threat," Psaki said. "As the National Security Adviser tweeted last night everyone running theses servers - government, private sector, academia - needs to act now to patch them."

Psaki stressed that they are concerned there are large number of victims and are working with partners to understand the scope of this.

"So, it's an ongoing process," she said. "We are now looking closely at the next steps we need to take. It's still developing. We urge network operators to take it very seriously."

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Senior Biden Admin. Officials to Tour US Southern Border, Brief President - White House

WASHINGTON, March 5 (Sputnik) - Senior Biden administration officials will visit the United States border with Mexico and brief the US President on the situation there, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said on Friday.

"President Biden has asked senior members of his team to travel to the border region in order to provide a full briefing to him," Psaki said during press briefing but did not provide additional details about the visit.

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Biden Agrees With US Senator Kaine on Need to Update AUMF Powers - White House

WASHINGTON, March 5 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden agrees with Senator Tim Kaine that the congressional powers to authorize the use of military force (AUMF) need to be updated, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said in a press briefing on Friday.

"The President has been obviously a close ally and partner with Senator Kaine on a number of initiatives in the past. He agrees that the AUMF has been around for 20 years and its long overdue for it to be updated," Psaki said.

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UN Asks DRC Mission to Look Into Murder of Prosecutor Probing Killing of Italian Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, March 5 (Sputnik) - The United Nations has asked the mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) to examine reports of the killing of the prosecutor investigating the assassination of the Italian ambassador to that country, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing on Friday.

Local media reported earlier on Friday that unidentified gunmen killed prosecutor William Assani on March 2 as he was returning from a meeting in Goma regarding the murder of the Italian ambassador and two other people accompanying him.

"We have seen those reports [and] we have asked our colleagues in the mission to look into it," Dujarric told reporters when asked whether the United Nations is aware of the development. On February 22, unidentified militants carried out an attack against a World Food Program (WFP) convoy traveling in the DRC's North Kivu province to visit a feeding program in a school in the town of Rutshuru. The incident claimed the lives of Attanasio, his security guard Vittorio Iacovacci and Congolese WFP driver Mustapha Milambo.

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US Orders Cuts in Toxic Heavy Metals in Baby Foods - Health Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 5 (Sputnik) - US baby food manufacturers were told to measure levels of toxins in infant foods in preparation for regulatory push to cut levels of heavy metals such as lead, cadmium, mercury and arsenic, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) said on Friday. "Today, we issued a letter to industry reminding manufacturers of these types of foods of their existing responsibilities related to these efforts," the FDA said in a press release. "Secondly, the agency is announcing that we'll soon be putting into action a plan aimed at reducing toxic elements in foods for babies and young children to levels as low as is reasonably achievable."

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UN Special Envoy Attends Pope's Reception in Iraq as Part of 'Historic' Visit - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, March 5 (Sputnik) - UN Special Representative for Iraq Jeanine Hennis-Plasschaer attended the reception for Pope Francis as part of what the United Nations sees a historic visit to the country, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing on Friday.

The Roman Catholic pontiff arrived in Iraq earlier on Friday for a four-day visit, becoming the first-ever pontiff to visit what is considered the homeland of Abraham.

"The Special Representative for Iraq Jeanine Hennis-Plasschaert was present at the reception for Pope Francis this morning," Dujarric said. "The UN mission in Iraq considers the Pope's visit to be historic and of great importance for the country."

The UN Special Adviser and Head of the Investigative Team to Promote Accountability for Crimes Committed by the Islamic State (IS terror group, banned in Russia), Karim Khan, said the Pope's visit to Mosul and Qaraqosh and his planned prayer for victims of war at the Church Square, destroyed by the IS, will be a "huge and momentous" event for the Christian community.

"It will also underline that Iraq is enriched by people of all faiths - and from all ethnic groups - and that every life matters," Khan added.

Ahead of the visit, the Pope said that he would come to the country as a peace messenger to pray for reconciliation after years of war and terrorism, which have plagued Iraq.

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FBI Arrests Ex-Trump Admin. Aide With Assault During Riot at US Capitol - Court Documents

WASHINGTON, March 5 (Sputnik) - The FBI on Friday arrested former State Department aide Federico Klein and charged him with assault against police officers during the January 6 incident at the US Capitol, court documents revealed.

"[A]ffiant observed a subject committing assaults on MPD [Metropolitan Police Department] and US Capitol Police officers on January 6, 2021, between approximately 2:43 p.m. and 3:30 p.m., in and around the Lower West Terrace of the Capitol building," the court documents said as revealed by the New York Times.

The FBI said its review of the incident included more than dozen photos as evidence of Klein's participation in the January 6 unrest. The agency said Klein verbally and physically engaged with the officers holding the line, thereby affecting their ability to disperse the crowd.

Klein, who worked in the State Department and previously for Donald Trump 2016 Presidential campaign, has violated a number of laws, including entering of a restricted area without lawful authorization, engaging in disruptive conduct and in acts of physical violence at the US Capitol as well as impeding official procedures and other criminal activities.

On January 6, a group of Trump supporters breached the US Capitol to protest lawmakers accepting electoral states from several US states that Trump claims were invalid and robbed him of election victory. US House Democrats impeached Trump for inciting insurrection, but he was acquitted in the Senate.

Trump has repeatedly said that in his speech on January 6 he called on his supporters to protest peacefully and patriotically.

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Biden, European Commission President Agree to Coordinate Policies on Russia - White House

WASHINGTON, March 5 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen in a phone call on Friday agreed to coordinate their policies toward China, Russia, Belarus, Ukraine and the Western Balkans, the White House said in a statement.

"The leaders also agreed to coordinate on issues of shared interest, including China, Russia, Belarus, Ukraine and the Western Balkans," the statement said.

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Biden, EC Chief Agree to Freeze Tariffs Over Aircraft Dispute for 4 Months - White House

WASHINGTON, March 5 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen agreed to stop the tariffs related to the aircraft trade disputes for four months, the White House said in a readout on Friday.

"Noting our shared values and the world's largest trade and investment relationship, the leaders agreed to suspend the tariffs related to the World Trade Organization (WTO) Aircraft disputes for four months and to work toward resolving these long running disputes at the WTO," the readout said.

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UN Calls on Algeria to Stop Violence Against Hirak Supporters Amid Mass Arrests

WASHINGTON, March 5 (Sputnik) - United Nations human rights experts have expressed concern over the Algerian authorities' prosecution of individuals participating in the Hirak movement, Office of UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) spokesperson Rupert Colville said in a statement on Friday.

"Hundreds of people have been prosecuted after the protests renewed on February 13 adding to the total of about 1,000 people prosecuted for participating in the Hirak movement," the statement said. "We urge the authorities to immediately and unconditionally release all those arbitrarily arrested or detained for allegedly supporting Hirak, and drop all charges against them."

The United Nations views the ongoing protests as a new phase of the 2019-2020 protests, when a total of 2,500 individuals were arrested for legitimately exercising their human rights, the statement added.

The Hirak movement - or Revolution of Smiles - started in February of 2019 with protests against the former Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, and eventually led to his resignation on April 2. The protests have continued until today as demonstrators maintain their calls for democratizing the country.

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US Vaccination Jabs Top 62Mln, 55% of Seniors Receive at Least 1 Shot - Task Force

WASHINGTON, March 5 (Sputnik) - More than 62 million Americans, including 55 percent of all seniors age 65 and above, have received at least one shot of a coronavirus vaccine, White House COVID-19 Task Force leader Jeff Zients said on Friday.

"Six weeks ago only 8 percent of seniors, those most vulnerable to COVID had received a vaccination. Today nearly 55 percent of people age 65 or older have received at least one shot," Zeints said in a televised press briefing.

Zients added that with the more than 82 million shots the United States has vaccinated the population more than any other country and also opened or expanded more than 450 community vaccination sites.

Despite progress toward an administration goal of vaccinating everyone in the country by May, Zients emphasized the need to continue wearing masks, social distancing and other mitigation measures recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

"The CDC says, it's very clear that these interventions work and they save lives," Zients said.

Zients' admonition was repeated by others on the task force panel, including CDC Director Rochelle Walensky and National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases Director Anthony Fauci.

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UN Special Envoy Urges UNSC to Be Robust in Pushing for End to Violence in Myanmar

UNITED NATIONS, March 5 (Sputnik) - UN Special Envoy for Myanmar Christine Schraner Burgener urged the UN Security Council on Friday to be robust in pushing on the Myanmar military to stop its violent crackdown on peaceful protesters.

"We must be robust and timely in pushing for a stop to the violence and the restoration of Myanmar's democratic institutions," Schraner Burgener said during closed UN Security Council consultations. "We must denounce the actions by the military, which continues to severely undermine the principles of this Organization and ignores our clear signals to uphold them." According to the special envoy, since the coup on February 1, the military has killed a total of around 50 peaceful protesters.

Schraner Burgener said she plans to visit other countries in the region as part of the United Nations efforts to promote stronger international coherence should conditions related to the novel coronavirus pandemic allow.

"The international community should not lend legitimacy or recognition to this a regime that has been forcefully imposed itself and nothing but chaos has since followed," she said.

The UN envoy pointed out that the ongoing political crisis in Myanmar adversely affects many other sectors, including the nation's immunization program.

Schraner Burgener also said the crisis has also had an unprecedented impact on Myanmar's economy as people have been seen rushing to ATM machines to withdraw their savings under an imminent fear of the banking system's collapse.

Amid the disruption of the production supply chain, Schraner Burgener warned that the situation in Myanmar is moving towards an acute humanitarian crisis.

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US Democrats Strike Deal for Slightly Lower but Longer Jobless Insurance Pay - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 5 (Sputnik) - US Senate Democrats have reached a deal to extend weekly unemployment insurance for Americans through September instead of an original August cutoff, but the payout will also be lower, Politico reported on Friday.

The deal would see weekly federal unemployment benefits reduced from \$400 per week, as approved by the House of Representatives, to \$300 weekly, the report said.

The agreement was hatched by both moderate and progressive Democrats on the sidelines of negotiations on a \$1.9 trillion coronavirus relief bill that are going on in the Senate between lawmakers representing the president and their rival Republicans, Politico added.

Unemployment insurance is one of the tenets of US economic support, paid out weekly to millions of jobless Americans.

Last week alone, new filings for jobless claims rose by just over 1 percent as an additional 745,000 Americans filed for benefits, Labor Department data showed on Thursday.

The US unemployment rate itself was little changed at 6.2 percentage points in February as the country added 379,000 jobs in a pandemic-suppressed market, the Labor Department said Friday.

The United States lost more than 21 million jobs between March and April, at the height of business lockdowns forced by the virus. At least 10 million of those jobs have not returned, with the US economy shrinking 3.5 percent in 2020 after a 2.2 percent growth in 2019.

Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell said on Thursday he did not expect the United States return anytime this year or so soon to maximum employment, which will be one the central bank's criteria for raising interest rates. Under the Fed's definition, maximum employment is achieved when the jobless rate is at 4.0 percent or lower.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic broke out, the Fed has kept US interest rates at between zero and 0.25 percent and pledged not to raise them until it sees maximum employment and inflation consistently at above 2 percent per annum.

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DRC Receives Over 1.7Mln Coronavirus Vaccines Via United Nations COVAX Initiative - UNICEF

UNITED NATIONS, March 5 (Sputnik) - The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) received more than 1.7 million doses of coronavirus vaccine through the United Nations' COVAX initiative, the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) said it in a press release on Friday.

"More than 1.7 million doses of COVID-19 vaccines have arrived in Kinshasa, the capital of the DRC," the release said.

The vaccines will be distributed based on World Health Organization's guidelines that prioritize vaccination of 20 percent of the population, comprised of health workers, people over 55 years of age and individuals with serious health conditions.

This first vaccines shipment will target four provinces most affected by the pandemic - Kinshasa, North Kivu, Central Kongo and Haut-Katanga. A plan for the distribution of vaccines for the rest of the country is now being finalized.

UNICEF said it supports the logistics of the operation and is also tasked with ensuring the security of the vaccine cold chain storage.

Health authorities decided to use the Astra Zeneca vaccine because it meets the DRC's existing storage conditions between 2 and 8 degrees Celsius.

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US Optimism That COVID-19 Crisis is Easing Hits Record 60% High - Poll

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - Adults in the United States have grown increasingly hopeful that the coronavirus pandemic is getting better, a view now held by a record 60 percent, a Gallup poll revealed on Friday.

"This record-high optimism likely reflects the steep decline in new COVID-19 cases in the US in late January and early February," a press release explaining the poll said.

For the first time in Gallup's trend, a majority of Americans (60 percent) perceive the coronavirus situation in the US as getting better, while 26 percent say it is staying the same and 14 percent believe it is getting worse, the release said.

Gallup polling on the pandemic during the past year shows a strong relationship between changes in coronavirus infection rates and Americans' assessment of the situation, the release added.

The impact of vaccinations against the coronavirus, however, is less clear. Pessimism actually increased in December when US government gave emergency use approval to the first coronavirus vaccine, according to the release.

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Health Canada Approves Johnson & Johnson Coronavirus Vaccine – Statement

TORONTO, March 5 (Sputnik) - Canada's health regulatory agency announced on Friday that it has approved the coronavirus vaccine produced by the Johnson & Johnson subsidiary Janssen Pharmaceuticals.

"Today, Health Canada authorized the COVID-19 vaccine manufactured by Janssen Inc.," the regulators said in a statement. "Health Canada received an application from Janssen Inc. for authorization of its COVID-19 vaccine on November 30, 2020. After a thorough, independent review of the evidence, the Department has determined that the vaccine meets Canada's stringent safety, efficacy and quality requirements."

The Johnson & Johnson vaccine is the fourth standalone vaccine to be approved by Health Canada and the first one-shot inoculation; the Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna vaccines were authorized in mid-December, while AstraZeneca's vaccine received regulatory approval last Friday.

Health Canada placed numerous terms and conditions on the vaccine by requiring that manufacturers continue to provide rolling data concerning its safety, efficacy and quality. The vaccine is authorized for use in individuals over the age of 18 and can be stored in temperatures between 2 and 8 degrees Celsius for at least three months, the statement said.

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US Trade Deficit in Goods Increased \$1.2Bln in January to Reach \$68.2Bln - Commerce Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 5 (Sputnik) - The US trade deficit in goods rose by \$1.2 billion, or almost 2 percent, in January to reach \$68.2 billion, data from the Commerce Department's Bureau of Economic Analysis showed on Friday.

"The goods and services deficit was \$68.2 billion in January, up \$1.2 billion from \$67.0 billion in December, revised," the Bureau of Economic Analysis said in a news release accompanying the data.

Exports of goods for December stood at \$191.9 billion while imports amounted to \$260.2 billion, it noted.

The US economy shrank 3.5 percent in 2020, after a 2.2 percent growth in 2019, as the restrictive measures for the coronavirus pandemic continued to take their toll on businesses and activity across the country.

The Bureau of Economic Analysis affirmed the impact of the coronavirus-related measures on the January trade deficit, saying trade in services remained particularly below pre-pandemic levels as the economy struggled to recover from the sharp declines in 2020.

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UN Special Envoy Urges UNSC to Be Robust in Pushing for End to Violence in Myanmar

UNITED NATIONS, March 5 (Sputnik) - UN Special Envoy for Myanmar Christine Schraner Burgener urged the UN Security Council on Friday to be robust in pushing on the Myanmar military to stop its violent crackdown on peaceful protesters.

"We must be robust and timely in pushing for a stop to the violence and the restoration of Myanmar's democratic institutions," Schraner Burgener said during closed Security Council consultations. "We must denounce the actions by the military, which continues to severely undermine the principles of this Organization and ignores our clear signals to uphold them."

According to the special envoy, since the coup on February 1, the military has killed a total of around 50 peaceful protesters.

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Dropping Mask Order Attempt to Deflect From Texas' Electric Grid Failure - Houston Mayor

WASHINGTON, March 5 (Sputnik) - Texas Governor Greg Abbott's announcement to drop the mask mandate and fully open the state to commercial activities is an attempt to deflect from the seriousness of the electric grid failure during the recent snowstorm, Houston Mayor Sylvester Turner said during the CERWeek energy conference on Friday.

"We just had system-wide failure of our electric grid during the winter storm, and there have been hearings in the legislature on that almost on a daily basis. It's a very costly storm because the state failed to take the necessary steps to have prevented it," Turner said. "I am thinking in many ways that dropping the mask order is an attempt to deflect from the seriousness of the failure of that electric grid."

On Tuesday, Abbott said he is dropping the novel coronavirus-related restrictions by lifting a statewide mask mandate and allowing all businesses in the state to reopen. Other US states that have lifted the mask mandate include Alaska, Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Iowa, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, Oklahoma, South Carolina, South Dakota and Tennessee.

Turner explained there is much discussion about whether to wear a mask in an effort to prevent contracting the novel coronavirus, but his view is the governor's decision to rescind the mask mandate is an attempt to divert the discussion on the electric grid's failure in Texas.

"I view it as a deflection," Turner said. "The state of Texas was already open 75 percent. I am not so much taken aback from going to a 100 percent. But what is essential is requiring people to keep on their masks when they are in the presence of other people."

Turner claimed until the residents are vaccinated against the coronavirus, they have to wear masks.

"These masks are critically important, and I was disappointed that the Governor decided to roll back the mask order," he said. "I just simply thought the order to roll back the mask... was simply not a prudent one. It was not wise."

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Biden Backs Bid by US Congress to Restrict President's War Powers - White House

WASHINGTON, March 5 (Sputnik) – President Joe Biden backs an effort by senators in Congress to restrict presidential war powers by repealing two laws that have allowed US presidents to use military force around the globe, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said on Friday.

Biden intends to "ensure that the authorizations for the use of military force currently on the books are replaced with a narrow and specific framework that will ensure we can protect Americans from terrorist threats while ending the forever wars," Psaki said in a statement to Politico.

The White House did not immediately respond to a request from Sputnik to verify the comments. On Wednesday, US Senators Tim Kaine and Todd Young re-introduced their bipartisan bill to repeal the 1991 and 2002 authorizations for the use military force (AUMFs) after Biden

approved airstrikes against Iran-back militias in eastern Syria last week. Their bill has the backing of several senators from both parties.

The US Constitution gives only the US Congress the power to wage war. But the Congress gave the president broad war powers with the two resolutions - the 1991 AUMF gave the president the power to use US military force in the Gulf War, while the 2001 AUMF approved using force against those responsible for the September 11 terror attacks of the same year. Successive US presidents have broadly interpreted the AUMFs to send armed forces to countries around the world, including Afghanistan, Libya, Turkey, Georgia, Yemen, Djibouti, Kenya, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Iraq, Somalia, the Philippines and Cuba.

Biden's explanation that strike in Syria came in "self-defense" in response to attacks by Iran-backed groups did not satisfy top members of Congress such as Senator Kaine, who has demanded a briefing on the administration's legal justification for the attacks.

The repeal of the war powers resolutions would not impact ongoing US operations against the Islamic State terrorist group (banned in Russia), Kaine said in a press release after re-introducing the bill.

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US Announces Up to \$5Mln Funding to Search for Mass Graves in Libya - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 5 (Sputnik) - The US government is offering contracts worth up to \$5 million for companies to search for mass graves in Libya in a two-to-five year project, the Department of State announced in a statement on Friday.

"The US Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor (DRL) announces an open competition for organizations interested in submitting applications for projects that improve accountability, justice and the rule of law in Libya," the statement said. The State Department explained the DRL bureau's goal in the project is to promote justice and accountability for gross human rights violations in Libya.

"DRL's objectives are to advocate for the rights of missing and disappeared persons ... in efforts to promote truth, justice and accountability for missing persons; and to strengthen the ability of Libyan authorities to address the mass graves issue in close coordination with civil society, family associations, and in accordance with international standards," the statement said. Groups seeking the funding will need to display their capability to support collaborative efforts between Libyan authorities and civil society groups that strengthen the legal and institutional framework to account for missing persons in a sustainable and effective manner, the State Department explained.

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Former US House Impeachment Manager Files Lawsuit Accusing Trump - Court Documents

WASHINGTON, March 5 (Sputnik) - US Congressman Eric Swalwell has sued former President Donald Trump, his son Donald Trump, Jr., lawyer Rudy Giuliani and Republican Congressman Mo Brooks in a federal lawsuit in Washington, DC accusing them of inciting the January 6 riot at the US Capitol claiming it was an "insurrection", court documents released on Friday said.

"[Trump] encouraged his followers to come to Washington, DC on January 6 and he encouraged them to go to the Capitol to 'fight like hell,'" the lawsuit, obtained by CNN, said. "Trump directly incited the violence at the Capitol that followed and then watched approvingly as the building was overrun."

Swalwell was the manager of the US House impeachment of Trump last month after the president left office. It was the first time any US current or former president had been impeached a second time and the first time one was impeached after he left office. The impeachment failed to be approved by the Senate.

"Trump also promoted and spoke at the January 6 rally , the culmination of the Defendants' coordinated effort to subvert the certification vote which was funded and organized by his campaign and groups supporting his candidacy.

Trump has repeatedly said he called on his supporters to protest what he called was election fraud peacefully and patriotically.

An earlier similar lawsuit was filed against Trump in February by Democratic Congressman Bennie Thompson against Trump, his legal adviser Giuliani and the right wing groups called the Oath Keepers and Proud Boys.

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UN Condemns Lengthy Prison Terms Given to Exiled Cambodia Dissidents to Block Return

UNITED NATIONS, March 5 (Sputnik) - The sentencing of nine exiled members from the disbanded Cambodian National Rescue Party (CNRP) violates international law by blocking dissidents from participating in national politics, a team of UN human rights monitors said on Friday.

"This is related to their plan to return to the country to take part in Cambodia's political life, which was publicized on social media," the rights monitors said in a press release.

The Phnom Penh municipal court recently convicted former CNRP leader Sam Rainsy's and eight others on charges that a series of two-year-old Facebook post marked an "attempt to commit a felony" that endangered the nation's institutions, the release said. Rainsy received a 25 year sentence, the release said.

"International human rights law guarantees freedoms of association and expression, as they are central pillar of democratic societies and guarantors of free and fair electoral processes," the release added.

The panel was led by UN Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in Cambodia Rhona Smith and included three other UN rights rapporteurs, according to the release.

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US Unemployment Little Changed After Adding 379,000 Jobs in Feb - Labor Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 5 (Sputnik) - The US unemployment rate was little changed at 6.2 percentage points in February as the country added 379,000 jobs in a pandemic-suppressed market, the Labor Department announced on Friday.

"Total nonfarm payroll employment rose by 379,000 in February, and the unemployment rate was little changed at 6.2 percent," the department's Bureau of Labor Statistics said in a statement.

The labor market continued to reflect the impact of the coronavirus pandemic, the bureau said.

"In February, most of the job gains occurred in leisure and hospitality, with smaller gains in temporary help services, health care and social assistance, retail trade, and Manufacturing," it said. "Employment declined in state and local government education, construction, and mining." The consensus among economists polled by US media was for a jobs growth of 182,000 in February. That puts what the Labor Department announced nearly 200,000 higher.

The department also upped January's employment gains to 166,000 from a previously reported 49,000, pointing to a steady six-digit growth over the two months. Despite that, the jobless rate remained effectively the same, demonstrating the challenge in growing the labor market amid the coronavirus' stranglehold on the economy.

The United States lost more than 21 million jobs between March and April, at the height of business lockdowns forced by the virus. At least 10 million of those jobs have not returned, data shows.

Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell said on Thursday he did not expect the United States return anytime this year or soon to maximum employment, which will be one the central bank's criteria for raising interest rates.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic broke out, the Fed has kept US interest rates at between zero and 0.25 percent and pledged not to raise them until it sees maximum employment and inflation consistently at above 2 percent per annum.

The US economy itself shrank 3.5 percent in 2020, after a 2.2 percent growth in 2019.

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US Designates Ex-Ukrainian Official Kolomoyskyy Over 'Corruption' – State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 5 (Sputnik) – The United States has designated Ukrainian businessman Ihor Kolomoyskyy and members of his immediate family over "corrupt acts" he engaged in while previously serving as a public official, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Friday.

"Today, I am announcing the public designation of oligarch and former Ukrainian public official Ihor Kolomoyskyy due to his involvement in significant corruption," Blinken said in a statement. "In his official capacity as a Governor of Ukraine's Dnipropetrovsk Oblast from 2014 to 2015, Kolomoyskyy was involved in corrupt acts that undermined rule of law and the Ukrainian public's faith in their government's democratic institutions and public processes, including using his political influence and official power for his personal benefit."

The US has also designated members of Kolomoyskyy's immediate family, including his wife, daughter and son, Blinken said. The designation bars any of them from entering the United States.

Blinken said the designation came in response to Kolomoyskyy's actions as a former public official but also expressed concerns over the businessman's current activities. The top US diplomat accused Kolomoyskyy of "ongoing efforts to undermine Ukraine's democratic processes and institutions," but did not elaborate on or provide evidence of the allegation.

"This designation reaffirms the US commitment to supporting political, economic, and justice sector reforms that are key to Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic path," he said.

He also expressed Washington's ongoing commitment to support reforms in Ukraine and fight corruption.

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US Adds 379,000 Jobs in February, Unemployment Rate Little Changed at 6.2% - Labor Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 5 (Sputnik) - The US unemployment rate was little changed at 6.2 percentage points in February as the country added 379,000 jobs last month in a pandemic-suppressed market, the Labor Department announced on Friday.

"Total nonfarm payroll employment rose by 379,000 in February, and the unemployment rate was little changed at 6.2 percent," the department's Bureau of Labor Statistics said in a press release.

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